Interview with HELMUT KOBLER
Holocaust Oral History Project
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Interviewer: Peggy Coster and John Grant
Transcriber: Debra O'Leary

Q: THIS IS PEGGY COSTER AND JACK BURNBERG; PRODUCER IS JOHN GRANT. WE ARE INTERVIEWING HELMUT KOBLER FOR THE HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY PROJECT IN SAN FRANCISCO. TODAY IS AUGUST 12TH, 1992. MY NAME IS PEGGY COSTER, WITH ME IS JAKE BURNER, AND JOHN GRANT IS THE CAMERAPERSON.

OKAY. WHY DON'T YOU JUST START BY TELLING US THE WHOLE STORY.

A: Okay. Well, my name is Helmut Kobler, and I was born January 18, 1928, in Vienna, Austria. I lived in Vienna for three years with my parents, and then we moved to a place called Pohrlitz, which is about 120 miles north from Vienna in the so-called Sudeitenland, which is a fringe of territory between Austria and Czechoslovakia, which in 1938 was taken over by the German army, by the Nazis. I lived in Pohrlitz, then, from 1931 until 1938, until the invasion of the Germans.

Pohrlitz was a little provincial town of about five, six thousand people, evenly distributed between Germans and Czechs. There also was a large Jewish community, which were bilingual. That means they could speak both languages: Czech and German. Most of them spoke German.

I attended a school -- a German school; one was the Czech school. I attended the German school until grade three. After that I did not go to school any more, because shortly thereafter the Germans took over, and being partly Jewish, I was not allowed to go in school.

Upon invasion of the Germans, my father escaped from Pohrlitz, which was the Sudeitenland, into Czechoslovakia proper, to a city called Berno, in Moravia. It is actually the second biggest city in Czechoslovakia, and it's about thirty miles -- thirty, forty miles -- away from Pohrlitz.

When the Nazis came in, every -- most of the Jewish population out of Pohrlitz escaped into Berno. It was felt that since my mother is not Jewish and is an Austrian that we would be safe to remain for the time being in Pohrlitz.

We stayed for another few months after the occupation in Pohrlitz. And I developed a very serious ear infection and was taken by ambulance to a hospital in Zneim, which is a provincial town, for an operation -- for a middle ear operation. At that time I was about ten years old. As I was being prepared for the operation in this hospital, somebody asked me where my father was. And I said, "Well, he is in Berno."

"What's he doing there?"

"Well, he escaped from the Nazis."

And so they stopped preparing me for the operation and threw me out, because they said I am a Jew and I am not worthy to be in this German hospital.

Q: NOW, WAS THIS IN ZNEIM?

A: Zneim.

Q: OR WAS THAT IN POHRLITZ?

A: No. That was in Zneim. That was further inside the Sudeitenland, which is, at that time, already taken over by the Germans.

And so they put me on a bus and sent me back to Pohrlitz. And I walked home from the bus station. And my mother was completely surprised to see me, and my ear was even worse. So she decided to take

me across the border now, to take me into Berno, to my father, to have the operation done there. She had to take me across the border at night.

And shortly after that my father -- my mother took my sister and my brother Otto, also, across the border. And we left all our other possessions in Pohrlitz and went into refugee camp in Berno.

As I recall, for about three months or so we were staying in a refugee camp. Most of the refugees, naturally, at that time were Jewish, so we were looked after by the Jewish commandants, as far as lodging and food goes.

And then I recall one day we woke up and the Germans were in Berno. And my father was gone. He escaped to Poland and then from Poland on to England where he remained for the rest of the war.

Meanwhile we were left to ourselves. We were living in a very poor tenement. My mother at that time was expecting my brother, Jan or Hansi. And she couldn't work. We could not get any kind of help from the Germans, of course not. The Czechs, they didn't dare to help us; and the remaining Jews who were around us were afraid themselves, had problems themselves. So we were kind of left -- the whole family, us children -- to shift for ourselves.

I remember selling newspapers on the corner, going from house to house and singing songs which were forbidden by the Germans. And we sang them, and people used to throw money at us, down. As I said, we were singing; and we were also begging and stealing. And that's how we kept ourselves alive for approximately three months.

Meanwhile, my mother had my brother and -- thinking about my brother Jan, which I remember clearly -- that when the Gestapo was coming, looking for my father, my mother must have been somewhere

around six, seven months pregnant. And they were beating her and trying to find out where my father is and so on. And I remember today just hanging on to the boot of that one Gestapo. I, together with my brother, we were hanging on to the boot so he couldn't kick. My mother was on the floor. They knocked her down to the floor. So she did not have a very nice pregnancy.

This brother Jan, then, was born and shortly thereafter we were sent or taken by the Germans and put into that so-called Jewish concentration camp in Ivancice, which at first was a Jewish refugee camp. And then when the Germans took over Czechoslovakia proper, they made it a concentration camp, filled it up with some more people. And that's where we stayed from 1939 until 1942.

While I was in this camp, in Ivancice, which was mostly then for persons of mixed marriages -- that means usually where one member of the marriage was Jewish and the other was another religion -- and elderly people who had somebody in a mixed marriage escaped either to England or to Poland and were there imprisoned.

Towards 1942 this camp was then changed into a slave labor camp where they were bringing in young men who were also called mischlings. The term mischlings means like -- in Germans means -- it means like mixed breed. And these were people who were rounded up all over Czechoslovakia and sent to this camp in Ivancice where they were put to work in nearby coal mines in Oslavany, mainly.

What I remember from this camp was that life really wasn't so bad. We got -- we had a place to sleep, very crowded sleeping conditions because the camp was an old leather factory with leather treatment pits out of concrete where families used to live. It was not very healthy, but we did

get a meal; and we had some place to sleep. In that camp I was put to work in the carpentry shop and in the laundry. And I at that time was from 11 to 14 years. I wasn't worked very hard, being a kid. I pretty soon forgot there were other times and there was life outside the camp. I didn't even realize that.

The camp was not an extermination camp. Also people died -- also people died in there, but this was not an extermination camp. And we weren't that mistreated as we were before, as I experienced later on.

As I said, it was a family camp. And the bad times usually came once a month when the Germans, Gestapo and SS, came from Berno and make inspection of the camp. And usually that's where most of the abuse and beatings and torturing was done -- by them. Otherwise the camp was administered by German Jews and as long as you kept your nose clean nothing happened. Nothing bad did happen to me.

Every so often in this camp we would long for mail to hear from outside about our father and so on. And we had a family who took us in in 19 -- between when we were refugees -- for Christmas and -- my brother and I. And we kept in touch with them. They were very nice people. And so we, me and -- my brother and I made it a habit to escape the camp, go to these people, beg around in Berno, and get some news maybe from my aunt or from my father. And then after a while we couldn't do anything else. We went and gave ourselves up to the Gestapo. Again, we got beaten up and sent back to camp, got beaten up in camp, again, and put into solitary confinement for a week or so. But we were able then to tell our mother the news we heard outside and so on. We brought in newspapers and all kinds of stuff, even letters.

And this stopped suddenly because after one of such an escape, the Gestapo came in and said that there's been smuggling going on from outside and escaping and so on and that from now on anybody who escapes will not be sent back to the camp, but will be shot. So that's when we stopped running away. And we stayed in the camp.

In 1942, I don't know when it was -- in June, 27 June 1942, the camp was liquidated and all the people were sent to Theresienstadt, except the ones who had a Christian mother, and that was three families. We were left in -- we were housed in Ivancice in a very primitive region in a very rundown house where all three families were located. I was sent to work in that same coal mine in Oslavany. At that time I was 14 years old. I worked there for practically two years until 1944.

We lived at a camp which was very close to the mine. I recall we were working six days a week, ten hours a day, in the mine. Very little food and very hard work. Again, during the day -- during the week it was not too bad, but the weekend, usually Sunday, on our days off, we were getting very much abused by the guards. And there were not very many guards in that camp. But I managed to escape quite a number of times and get to see my father -- get to my mother, and get back in the camp before they noticed I was gone, because I knew the area and I knew how to get in and out.

The abuse we suffered there was from the German supervisors in the mine and also from the Czech collaborators who were collaborating with the Nazis. There were numerous beatings, I recall, underground.

As a matter of fact, I recall one incident very clearly where it was after the shift and we were sitting and waiting for the cage -- it was called

the cage -- to take us up to the surface. And one of the Czech Nazis, I called them, was saying, "Oh, your father is a son of a bitch."

"And why do you say that?"

"Oh, he left you and your mother and five children here, and he is in England now having a nice time, and you guys have to suffer here."

And I was so angry, and I hit him with my lamp; and I didn't go to the surface for about a week or so, staying underground. I was afraid if I go back up, I would be handed over to the Gestapo. And so the miners used to bring me food down. And for about two weeks, I didn't see daylight at all. Until finally they talked me out of this, promised me that nothing was going to happen and that I should come out of the mine and be there.

Again, the work was hard. The abuse was hard. Very little food. I remember going to work with a piece of bread and a bottle of water. That's all I got to go to work with for a ten-hour shift underground. I didn't smoke at that time, but I remember even then people were trading their bread for cigarettes. In that mine -- it was a very deep mine -- it was very hot. We were working naked, barefoot. I remember today I still have on my feet coal mine scars, which are usually dark scars from cuts and bruises I had on my feet.

Q: OKAY.

A: So I spent total of two years working in this coal mine, from 14 to about 16, until 1944. To just sum it up, what I was doing was really I was a slave laborer. I was working like a slave; I was being beaten like a slave. I wasn't getting paid, and I wasn't getting fed properly. And what I can remember is the continuous day-in, day-out work, coming home, coming to my bunk, going down on my bunk and falling asleep, and next thing I wake up in the morning again and back to the coal mine.

In winter, I can remember where for two months, two or three months, I didn't see daylight. I went underground in the dark. In the mine it was dark, and then when I came out it was dark again. So I missed the sun. I just felt more like one of those horses in the mine. They had horses and they got well-treated. But they never did get out of the mine. They never seen daylight. Once they get in the mine, they will die there. And I was very much afraid I would be very much like one of those horses. I would just die in the mine for either I stop or being overworked.

Well, anyway, one day in 1944, I was notified to get myself ready to go to Theresienstadt, which is the camp where practically everybody goes through from -- who was Jewish or of Jewish ancestors -- and goes to Auschwitz or Dachau, and so on. And so I said, well, that was it. When I asked around and they said, "Well, you are the oldest one now, you have to go." In Theresienstadt it was about a week and I was put out to work at a place called Postelberg, which is also in the Sudeitenland, but on the Bohemian border between Bohemia ad German. And in Postelberg I was put to work under the German organization Todd, which is kind of a pioneer military German organization. They built airfields, bridges, and any kind of heavy constructions.

And as the labor force, it was usually slave laborers from Poland, Russian prisoners of war, anything they can get ahold of in Poland. So I was put in that camp in Postelberg. And I remember it was winter '44, and it was cold. And we were improperly dressed. When I say improperly dressed, I mean we were not dressed for the cold. I had wooden shoes and no socks, wrapped my shoes in newspapers or old rags. Not enough food, because the camp was just newly established. There was very little food to go around for the prisoners.

The work was from dawn to dusk. Very hard work. My job was digging ditches for a four-inch underground pipeline, fuel line, at the airfields. The way the Germans did that, in the morning they came and measured up, let's say, five meters, and say that's 15, 20 feet of ditch about 18 inches wide and 3 feet deep. The ground was frozen. They had to work with a pick, and that was your work for the day. Usually you never could finish it. It was just frustrating.

I started getting very depressed, very hungry, hopeless. Seeing them building a new airfield there and hoping that the war was going to be over, it was not believable. The Germans didn't change. They were not any nicer or any kinder. They were just the same old arrogant bastards that they were in 1944 as they were in '42.

For me the situation became more and more hopeless. One afternoon I thought, "I've had it." And I took that pick and punched a hole in the pipe. Just out of frustration, not anything else. Naturally the Germans knew right away the next morning who did it because they knew who was working in that section. So they arrested me; and they handed me over to the Gestapo and accused me of sabotage. After spending a few days in the jail in Postelberg, I was taken to the Gestapo prison in Saaz. There I was officially accused of being a saboteur. They were deciding what they were going to do with me.

While I was in Saaz, I was put on a work detail which consisted of several -- ten prisoners. We were picked up in the morning by a guard, taken up to the cemetery, and we were digging graves.

Why I mention that was because that was to be my most favorable job I can remember from the whole time of the war because the graves we were supposed to be digging were for Germans, not for prisoners, but for

Germans who died. It was a German city, and German officers who were killed at the war and were brought -- their bodies were brought back. So we usually dug about ten graves every day. It used to give me great pleasure to know that that's a German being buried in there. So much for what I remember about Saaz.

From Saaz I was taken to Gestapo prison in Karlsbad, which is today called Karalabard in Czechoslovakia. Now this one was tough. The Americans were coming from one side; the Russians from the other side, and the Germans were getting panicky. Instead of getting better, they were getting worse. In this Gestapo prison I was beaten up every day for nothing. I was beaten up because I was supposed to say I wasn't a Jew. And I said, "I'm not a Jew. I'm a Catholic."

"No, you're a Jew. And say you're a Jew."

"Okay, I'm a Jew."

"No, you're not a Jew. Say you are a Catholic."

So I was beaten up again and so it's been going.

During the day most of the prisoners were taken out to clean the ruins and the debris after the Allied bombing during the night. A lot of Germans have lost their families. So when they seen us, they even beat us on the street with sticks, throw rocks at us, and some other things as we were cleaning the debris away.

Nothing to eat; always hunger. In this Gestapo prison I also remember German officers being prisoners who were either found away from their units or run away from their units; and usually they were brought in at night, in the evening, dumped in the cell, and in the morning they were taken out in the yard and shot. It was our job just to

pick them up in the morning, put them into wooden boxes, and a truck came and hauled them away.

I remember while on a detail of cleaning the debris up, there was a latrine for the workers to go -- one of those temporary latrines, as we called shithouses -- outside for the people working to go and do their business. I went to one of them, and I looked in, and there on top of the shit was half a sandwich, eaten, and it was lying in there. I was so hungry I reached in, I picked it up, I cleaned it up, and I ate it. So that's about the extent of how hungry I was -- to tell you. At that time I was 16 years old.

The next thing that still sticks in my mind, I was sentenced in Karlsbad to go to Dachau, to be transferred. And the guy, this SS officer, read me the sentence. I didn't even know that I was found guilty, but I was sentenced to go to Dachau. I remember him say, "The next possible transport, you will go on to Dachau. You are going to Dachau."

Okay. So then one day they took about 20 of us from out of this prison, and we were all going to Dachau. They handcuffed us two to a -- in pairs -- and we were marched to the station to go on a special train to Dachau. I remember walking out through Karlsbad, and up in the first floor there was a woman looking at us. I signaled to her with my finger like I want something to eat (indicating). You know, give me something. She motioned us to wait and walked away from the window. I thought she went and got some food. And we were standing up underneath the window, and she came and she poured the contents of a pisspot on us. Everybody laughed. It was funny.

So we were led on to the station in Karlsbad. We were put on a prisoner train to go to Dachau. We were on the train in the boxcars for, I would say, about seven days. No food. First few days we had water, but

after that it was gone. When we finally arrived in Dachau -- I must explain to you what it was at that time -- it was just like a crazy house. There were trains going back and forward, munition trains, personal trains going, all kinds of people trains. You just couldn't even know where you were going, whether you were going east or west or north or south.

So we arrived in Dachau, and they wouldn't let us off the train. They took us off the train and housed us in some barracks, told us we had to go back, because Dachau was going to be liquidated and wouldn't receive no more prisoners because Americans were close by. So the next day we went back in the same train. Again, seven days, no food, no water, to get back to Karlsbad and back to that same prison.

I remember very clearly being in that prison in Karlsbad and looking out the window one night, and I could feel the bombing, the trembling of the earth. It was just like an earthquake. I could see through the cell window the sky being lit up far away, and it was the air raid on Dresden. I could see it from the cell. I remember that out of Karlsbad.

Well, anyway. Dachau didn't want us; the Germans didn't know what to do with us. They knew the situation was getting very critical with them. So I found out that the Germans were digging an air raid shelter into a rock on the cliff which was right next to the Gestapo. And that's for the air raids, for them and their families, which really is just like a small tunnel in the rock cliff.

I talked to this one German SS guard, and I told him that I'm an experienced miner. And I know how to do those things, and I would like to volunteer for the detail. And so I got put onto that detail as a prisoner, to dig this tunnel, this air raid shelter.

On March 25th, 1945, while working in this tunnel, I decided to escape. Well, I decided already before that, but I decided to escape that day. I must think -- I was wearing a gray prisoner's uniform, wooden shoes, or wooden clogs, like, and I had a shirt on and a jacket -- prison jacket. It was March 25, and it was colder than hell. I decided I'm going to go and escape. On the spur of the moment. I told the guard I got to go outside to go to relieve myself. And he stuck his head out -- he was sitting in a nice warm shack just outside the tunnel -- and he told me to hurry up. And it was about 10:00 o'clock at night. I said, "Yes, I'll hurry up." And I went into this little latrine and I sneaked out and I ran up the hill and I escaped.

I was out of there. It was cold, but I didn't feel cold at all. I got up on the hill way above the Gestapo prison. Karlsbad is a hilly type of city. I was on top of the hill on the road which I thought was leading towards Czechoslovakia and to where I felt towards safety. All of a sudden in the dark I heard somebody say, "Halt." (Speaks in Czech). And somebody shines a light -- one of the German policemen, not Gestapo, not SS, just a normal policeman. So since I speak fluently German and I was very -- it was easy for me to imitate the dialect. I can speak Austrian dialect or Czech dialect or any of the other dialects I used to pick up in the camp. So they said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm working down in the quarry. I've got to go. I have night shift on it."

And he says, "Well, just hold it."

And I was hearing the sirens going down below. And I said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "You got to wait here. There is something going on. It is not an air raid. There is something going on because the sirens are going."

So I was staying there, and out of the building comes another policeman. And he says, "Oh, one of the men of the Gestapo, escaped. That's why the siren." And this other guy who caught me was saying, "Well, I got one here. I stopped one here."

And this guy asked me who am I, where are my documents. "I don't carry my documents to work," was my reply. And this is all in the dark, because it's an air raid. Usually during the air raid all the lights go out and everything. And this man shines his light on me -- his flashlight -- from top to bottom, (indicating), came up and down, and I'm as sure as I'm today that he recognized who I was. And he said, "Okay. Get going." And let me go. If nothing else, he must have recognized the wooden shoes, because that was a sure giveaway.

So I made my way for about a week just sleeping during the day in boxcars, haystacks, and old farmhouses. And kept on making my way towards Prague. I was eating or feeding myself as much as I could from leftover sugar beets from what was left in the fields of sugar beets that were frozen. I ate that and I ate pine cones and anything I could see. I made my way all the way until finally I must have been across the border, and I threw caution away. I was in this little farm village, and it was noon. I was hungry and cold and miserable. I see just a few steps ahead of me a door opens and a man comes out carrying a ladder, and a young teenage girl was opening the door for him.

So I went there, and I asked where the nearest railroad station was. And she pointed it out to me, and she said, "You an escaped prisoner?" I says, "Yeah." And she said, "You are hungry, too?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Come in." And they took me in and hid me up in the -- what do you call it?

Q: LOFT?

A: -- in the loft. Yeah, in a loft. And fed me for about three days. There were other daughters in the family. Finally, I think the parents got pretty scared, and they said I'm going to have to go. They took me to the railroad station, and they bought me a ticket. I got on the train -- and I got on a train and changed trains in Prague, went on the train to Berno, Moravia. That's where I wanted to get -- to the town where I used to live. I knew that's where the underground was. I was going to join the underground and be safe. I said, well -- everything went so well.

And I said, I knew that in Berno the Gestapo have at the station always there the guards to check ID's and to check documents and so on. Since I didn't have any documents or anything, I said I got to get off at least two stations before Berno. But what happened was that I was so tired out, and it was so nice and warm in the train, I fell asleep; and the train pulled right in the station. I got out, walked up the stairs, and right into the arms of the Gestapo.

So I was arrested and taken to very infamous Gestapo prison, which is called Kaunicovecoleje in Berno. It's -- again, you have got to imagine that at the time the Russians were coming in from the east and the Americans from the west, and the Gestapo was panicky and had no place to go. I think at that time they realized it. So I was put into the meanest Gestapo prison I've ever been in, or you could imagine. Executions daily, daily. I was in a cell on the second floor, and my bunk was the second bunk. I remember today the windows were high so I could see out of my -- if I was in the second bunk, I could look down, and I could see the executions going on.

I want to try to describe this in more detail so you can understand. It was every morning. This prison had a stone granite floor, and you could hear the Gestapo walking out, going opening up the cell with the keys, pulling out the prisoners, closing the door, going a few steps, new door open, and new prisoners -- people crying and yelling because they know where they're going. So there you sit and you listen for these footsteps to come to your door, because you know that it is your turn now or somebody else's turn in that cell. So I was very much afraid that I'm going to be one of those people executed.

So I used to go -- even so, I was afraid, I was very curious. And I used to climb up on my bunk and look down and I see 10, 20 prisoners -- just guys standing, always with this gun. Not a Tommy gun, just a pistol, a handgun, a Walther. Several other prisoners in -- other guards holding prisoners in the back, and they go and they are all handcuffed with their hands behind. This one guy makes them kneel down, and the puts the gun right in the neck and shoots them. Guy falls over. Next, boom, shoots him. And usually every day about 20 of them. Most of the prisoners who were shot were Czech partisans, underground fighters, and so on. That went on every day, every day.

I wasn't even interviewed any more, you know, to where I came from or what I was doing and so on. This went on right through Easter. Then it stopped. Then one day -- oh, I forgot this one story which is just coming into my head now.

As I was in this cell one day, they brought in an old -- not old, well maybe old, he was 50, 60 years old -- Czech farmer, peasant. He had a little farm somewhere in the mountains, and in the evening they pushed him into our cell. And the guy was completely in shock, was beyond himself.

So we asked him what's the matter. And he said, "They are going to kill me in the morning. They are going to shoot me in the morning."

"Why?" He said he was sentenced for death this afternoon.

"Well, what for? What did you do?" We couldn't even believe, an old guy like that. Why, you know.

So his story was that his daughter got married, and it's customary in this region and still today that at the wedding you kill a pig and you have a big feast. At the wedding, it's traditional, you kill a pig. It was practiced. So the Germans found out and that was against the law, because you had no right to kill a pig that belonged to the German Reich. That belonged to the war effort. For killing a pig you could be accused of sabotaging the German effort and send you to jail -- you'd be imprisoned or shot or whatever they at that time wanted to do with you.

So this old guy got sentenced to death because he killed a pig for his daughter's wedding. I remember him walking back and forth in that small cell and saying, praying, and at the same time he was praying, saying, "Oh, Father, our wise so-and-so," and, "This can't be, it can't be. A life for a pig, a pig for a life, a life for a pig. I only killed a pig for my daughter's wedding. It can't be. You can't let that happened." And he went on all night long. In the morning they came and took him out and shot him. As a matter of fact, when they got him, I thought they were going to get me because I was listening to the footsteps when they come in.

The other thing I remember about this particular prison was that in the evening or early night, we heard a lot of commotion going on. "What's going on?" And all of sudden, they pushed into my cell three people -- actually, was two guys and one on a stretcher. So the two stretcher carriers and one was on the stretcher. I could see he was all

bloody. And they set the stretcher in the middle of the cell. We tried to talk to the two guys who brought him in. They were all bloody and beaten up. And found out they were Russian partisans. The Germans just got hold of a Russian partisan group, and they had a shoot-out with them, and this guy on the stretcher was a commandant, was badly wounded. They didn't attend to his wounds. These two Russians who were with him tried to do their best, but the guy was practically dead already. He was just crying. And in the morning they came, told the two Russians to pick him up and the stretcher and took them down to the place where they'd been shooting the people, put the stretcher -- laid the stretcher down, shot the two guys right there standing up, shot the guy on the stretcher. That's about my most vivid memory out of that.

Naturally, the daily beatings and abuse and so on, I was used to. But there I was, deadly afraid of what was going to happen to me. A few days later after that they did come to my cell. They did take me out, and I was led down the stairs, down to the hallway, and put into a -- what they used to have -- a big receiving cell and was told to stand with my face against the wall, my hands behind my back. And they were bringing in a whole lot of other ones. As I was in this receiving cell, the windows -- one or two windows looked out directly on that area where they carried out the executions. And I counted about 40 to 50 wooden boxes stacked about five high, one on each other. I could see the blood running still out of the boxes, because they didn't even have any other transportation to transport the prisoners' bodies to the crematorium in Berno. So they were just stacked up there. I remember that.

So I -- since the last two days there was no more shootings, so I wasn't that afraid of getting shot. I was taken with that whole group of us

into the station in Berno. There we were loaded up into a boxcar. Usually there was -- you know how arrogant the fucking Germans are -- in that boxcars was (indicating) a notice "four horses or 20 men allowed." Can't be more. We were pushed into a boxcar -- 200 men. They had three boxcars. Apparently, I don't think they could have gotten any more into that boxcar. They were loading all those prisoners they had left in that Gestapo prison. I remember like today they were pushing them and pushing them. And when they can't any more and people were screaming, getting squashed in the back and all that Gestapo did was, boom, boom, fired his gun three times in the air and now there was room for ten more. And that's how he squashed them in. They were all afraid.

So what happened -- what the purpose of that was, the Gestapo decided to flee to the Americans to the west. That means a trek across Czechoslovakia to close to the German border. They wanted to take their families with them. So they loaded the families into normal Pullman cars and put the first three cars stuffed full of prisoners right behind the locomotive.

Now why they did that was the Americans at that time were practically superior in the sky. They dominated the skies. Anything moving, they would send dive bombers down at them, and all they did was shot the locomotives to pieces and that stopped the whole train. So they put on the boxcars and on the train they put a Red Cross making them believe they were a Red Cross, because that's the only thing they feared was that they be attacked by the American dive bombers. So they took us prisoners, us hostages, with them so they don't attack the train.

They also advertised -- as I later found out -- in radio and so on that in the three boxcars are very important political prisoners. As a matter of

fact, I understand that in this train was a nephew of Churchill, a number of American, not American, English, British officers, and a lot of prisoners who had relatives in England or in the West -- any kind of connection. In other words, they did that to prevent the Allies from attacking that train.

I was on this transport for about 12 days. I don't know how to describe to you what it was like. There was -- at that time it was already a little bit better, was not cold. It was getting warmer. It was the end of April, towards the end of April. So, it was hot, and you couldn't -- you were squashed, and you couldn't bend; you couldn't move. You peed in your pants; you shat in your pants. You did everything; you couldn't move. So after three or four days you could imagine what it was like. It stunk.

Most of the people at that time were already semiconscious, conscious, or unconscious. I was lucky that I was able to get into the boxcar where I had my back against the wall of the car. But people just dropped unconscious, and they couldn't get to the ground. They were just wedged in there, just like sardines, against the walls. It was hot, and we started screaming for water. We were stopped in a very busy railroad crossing -- major railroad town called Jijhlava. And to get to that place, we would have taken about five hours from Berno by train. It took us about five days. Again, you got to imagine the Russian front was only about maybe 50 miles away. So there were trains going up to the front with soldiers and ammunitions and guns and tanks. And there was trains coming with wounded from the town, and there were refugees on the train. There was everything.

I remember in this place there was -- this one man said the only thing we can do is -- we were standing already for a day at this place -- we

thought we were left alone, so let's start yelling and screaming. We started yelling and asking in Czech for help. "Help us. Help us." And so on. The German Gestapo came. One of the Gestapo said, "What is it?" And they were talking in Czech, and so I said in German, "We need water. We need water." He said, "Okay. Two of you come out and get water." And they had those big milk cans -- we had that in the train first when we got in; there was water; that was gone within a day -- to go and get water. And we went to get the water at the station.

And there I seen another train, maybe eight, nine cars. These were boxcars -- open boxcars. That means they had no roof. And they were loaded full of dead bodies -- still, stiff bodies. You could see them in the sky -- just right loaded up to the top. These were trains which were apparently coming from the east with the Germans where they couldn't get rid of the bodies. They came out of Auschwitz, I understand later on. So I have seen that with my own eyes. I can bear witness to that.

So we got the water, got back in the train, and after a while the train started moving. We felt at least a little bit better, but still we could hardly breathe in this place.

Then I would say about the ninth day -- I didn't know where we were; I didn't even know whether it was day or night -- and I was leaning against the wall, half conscious, thinking I'm dying. And all of a sudden I hear machine gunfire. It woke me up. I was startled. I hear bullets flying right into the boxcar. We were even hearing the airplane noise. I look up and everybody was in a pile. Everybody was on the ground. Before we couldn't get to the ground, but now, they were all on the ground. It was an attack by the Americans, the dive bombers, and they didn't give a damn. They got the locomotives, and they got also a few in the boxcar.

There was -- in my boxcar there was about 20 dead. I remember before I could throw myself onto the rest of the pile, I heard the bullets going through into these people. Again, we couldn't do anything with them -- we couldn't even help them. We heard them screaming. I would suspect that some of them must have died not of the bullets, but of suffocation.

You hear the screaming. But there's nothing you could do, you know. After a while the screaming stopped; the train kept going. The bodies started stinking. And I think the day ten the Germans stopped someplace on the road, not near a station, opened the car, and said to throw the bodies out. I helped throw some of them out, because I was young. The rest of them were practically dead already. And we threw them out or laid them out on the side of the railroad. I seen that all three cars had a bunch of bodies next to them -- all three of the boxcars. I also seen the women and the children on the front of the train. They came out, you know -- and women with babies in their arms. And they looked at it, and they didn't say anything. Their biggest hurry was to get to the American zone -- they were American -- and surrender to the Americans.

So that went on for about another two days, and we came into a place called Mirosov, which is in northern Bohemia. We got to the railroad station, and the doors opened. A whole bunch of German SS stood by with guns. "Raus, raus, raus. Get out of the car." And they marched us into this camp in Mirosov. First time we got something to eat there. And I remember I got usually an inch of bread with the biggest slab of margarine on top that you've ever seen for so many years. So we ate it. That was supposed to be our full ration for the next day. Everybody ate it up.

Well, I still think it was done on purpose by the Germans because right after that, the next day, that camp was just like dead. Everybody had dysentery, diarrhea, from not being used to that margarine and the bread, you know. It was so bad you didn't even get out of the bunk. You just -- it was awful. The Germans didn't have too many guards. So I think they did that on purpose so that these people really can't run away.

It was not a very difficult concentration camp. It was not two layers of barbed wire; it was just one barbed wire. It was a typical prisoner-of-war camp. It used to serve as a prisoner-of-war camp before that. I see the guards, and they didn't have too many guards. They didn't have enough guards to take care of what they were bringing. And so I was very happy. I said I will be able to escape out of that one pretty quick, as soon as I get a little repaired.

Then one morning I see the SS guards who I knew there, and he was in a Wehrmacht uniform, instead of the SS uniform. He was in kind of ordinary soldier uniform, not even an officer soldier. He was an ordinary corporal. So I knew there was something going on. I escaped. I got under the wire, got out, got into Mirosov on the 5th of May 1945. I understood later on that on the 7th of May they woke up in the camp in the morning and there was nobody there. So on the 8th of May the Americans came, and I was liberated. That was it. I make my way home, back to Ivancice.

Q: WHY DON'T WE STOP.

(Break)

Q: DO YOU WANT TO START WITH LIBERATION?

A: Okay. So 5th of May 1945, I was liberated. Well, actually, to correct that, on the 5th of May I escaped from the concentration camp. On the 8th

of May, I was officially liberated by the American army. I made my way home.

You must understand that I was some 500 miles away from where I considered my home; that is, where my mother and the rest of my family were in Ivancice, at the time. Again, it is very hard to describe. On the roads, the railroads -- the railroad was impossible to use. They were all smashed up so there was no chance to catch a train or to get a bus. So the only way to get home was to walk. So out of that camp we found a number of us who were going in the -- heading in the same direction. We got a little certificate from the American army and to extend all courtesies to us, that we were making our way home. And that was it.

To imagine what it looked like at that time -- I can recall to see thousands and thousands of German soldiers still with their weapons, tanks, and everything, just trying so hard to get to surrender to the Americans. For at least a week after the liberation, I seen colonies and colonies, divisions and divisions, trying to get to the Americans to surrender. For them the war was over.

So I looked on to them and here I was still in my old, stinking, lousy prison uniform. When I say it was lousy, it was lousy, because I was full of lice; and I don't think I had bathed or washed for months. So it was still the same filthy, that I brought over from the camp.

So I decided first of all I got to get myself a gun. So I got myself a gun from one of the Germans. And then I decided I got to get myself some decent clothes. So I got a German officer to give me his uniform. I took his uniform, and I traded him mine. I thought this was a fair deal, right now, because I was the one in power. I had the gun, and I had the future. He didn't.

So I traded him my clogs for his nice boots and his nice uniform. I took all the insignia off of his uniform and out of the red cloth I make myself a three Russian stars, put one on this shoulder and one on this shoulder and one here (indicating). And I was dressed nice and warm, and I was ready to make my way home. I had good boots, so things looked better for me.

As I was walking my way home, sometimes I hitched a ride with an American army transport, sometimes with a Russian army transport, sometimes it was anybody who would come along. Most of it was just walking and slugging.

One of my prison buddy friends who was heading for Berno became my friend. And we were walking our way back home together. Naturally he got himself a German uniform, too, and put the Russian stars on it, too. As we started -- the columns of German soldiers were running into the Americans to surrender. We started now seeing columns of German soldiers on the road being marched by Russians into Siberia, into prison camps. And usually as we were walking home, usually we tried to get into a town. And we would go and try to find our place to sleep overnight -- as in the city park or someplace around there.

I recall that this one day we got to this one city park, and we started a little campfire. We warmed up our provisions -- usually some tin cans of German rations -- and all of a sudden this park fills up with German soldiers. It was completely full with German prisoners, actually Russian prisoners. They're being marched towards Russia, and their habit also was to go every time overnight to overnight someplace in a park or someplace. And then all of a sudden I find myself in the middle of German prisoners in a German uniform with Russian stars on the shoulder. I'm laughing

today, but it was just terrible, terrible. The Russians had a habit, they put the whole bunch of the German prisoner soldiers into this park, and they put a bunch of guards on horses around, and they usually have a few dogs and so on.

My friend says, "What are we going to do now?" Now we have to march into Russia with these Krauts here. Here comes this one German officer to me and says, "These stars aren't going to help you to get away from here. I wouldn't want you to attempt to escape." And he tells me that in German. He says, "It's ridiculous. We have no place to go. We just have to march with the Russians, and you're making it, if you're trying to escape, you're making it hard on the other ones, because they haven't been treating us to bad right now, you know." So I suddenly realized that officer is thinking I am a German officer who has put on the stars so I can escape. So I convinced him I am pretty sure I can escape if he just leaves me alone. So we did get out of that park alive. Back again, on the road.

Q: HOW?

A: What?

Q: HOW?

A: We just waited until it got dark and sneaked out between the Russian guards, you know. But it was so funny. If this guy had known I took the uniform off a German officer -- there's again my German came into play -- that I could speak the German. And I understood what he was saying. So that was the way of on the road going home.

The other one was I remember on this way home, and as I say, that took about three or four -- pretty close to three weeks to get there. Ironically, and I say that more for the benefit of my children -- I love dogs

now, and I breed dogs. I have a number of dogs. I love dogs. And again, we were in one of those little towns, German towns, and there comes an old lady out. And she has a beautiful little dog and took the dog for a walk. We've been for years eating dogs and cats and things like that. Got to have fresh meat and to see that little well-fed dog, well, that was the greatest thing I'd ever seen.

Again, my friend couldn't speak German. He spoke only Czech, but I could. And so I talked to the little lady and I asked her about the dog -- what kind of dog was it -- real sneaky, like -- nice dog. I said, "Could I walk it for you for a while?" "Oh, yes, sure," you know. So I kind of walked it, and I said, "Can my friend walk the dog?" And she said, "Oh, sure, sure."

So I talked to the old lady, and my friend took the dog and killed the dog. And she said, "Where is your friend with the dog?"

I said, "I don't know. I'll go look for him."

I knew where he was, and he already had the fire going and the dog skinned. So I have to remember that. I recall that as being really my first warm meal, homecooked meal, in many years, this German dog.

Now, what else do I remember on that? I remember going, coming now into Berno. I got a ride on a bus -- on the roof of a bus, you know.

We were coming into Berno, and they had tramways. And the tramway was all shot, but the wires were still hanging across, you know. The driver said, "Be careful when you're on the roof when we get into Berno. These wires are hanging down." So I was sitting on the roof, and it was nice and sunny. And I was happy, going home, and I see wires. I lie down and yell out for the others to lie flat on the roof. And about four or five didn't either hear me or see it, and they were just sheared off the roof, just like that, you know (indicating).

Another thing I seen was right after the war coming home. Again a lot of people coming home, a lot of people staying in those parks. And we were getting from various organizations -- we get these cans of meat. Like here they have Spam and things like that. The Germans had bigger cans like that. We never knew -- a lot of people didn't know what to do with it, how to eat it or -- so there was this one group of people in this park and warming up over campfire, warming up the food. They had those tins, and at that time nobody had a knife or can opener or anything. You tried to open it with whatever you could. But this one group thought that the meat inside was raw, that you have to cook it. And they boiled this can, and then this one lady tried to open it with a nail -- punched a nail, and the whole can exploded into her face. It was a terrible sight. So there was still deaths, even on the way home.

The war was supposed to be over but there was still death around. You still had to be very careful and very inventive to be able to survive. So I made my way home, and I came home. My mother was tuberculosis; my sister was tuberculosis. This brother Jan I was talking about in the beginning -- by that time he was seven years old. He couldn't walk; he couldn't even talk. He couldn't do anything. He was completely brain-paralyzed. My other brother was sick. And my mother couldn't even believe me -- it was me. She cried because she thought I was dead, I died in this Gestapo prison. Because they told her I'd never get out alive from there. And she tried to hug me, and I said, "No, no, no. Don't touch me. I am full of lice. I got so many lices." She took me out in the yard, you know, and got buckets of boiling water and deloused me as much as she could and washed the uniform.

Again, I heard a lot of German soldiers marching into prison camp, into Russian prison camps, and they were marching outside my house. Again, colonies and colonies, and they were singing -- they were singing the same Germans songs they used to sing before. They were just marching to it. The only difference was they had no weapons.

And I got really crazy. I got out this gun, and I was going to shoot them. I had had it, having seen all those things. And my mother stopped me. She said, "This has to stop. First you kill them. They'll kill your children. It's going to be the same thing. It's got to stop. Forget it. Don't be hateful."

Well, after that I stayed home for about a week. I had this urge for revenge. Instead of, you know, being happy that I'm free, I was more and more possessed by trying to have revenge. And I knew enough to say that this German soldier out there marching and so on is not really my enemy. So it's very difficult to go and try and do harm to him, because he hasn't done any harm to me. So I decided to go and look for some of those Gestapo people or SS people, either from Karlsbad or from Oslavany. So I spent three months with another friend looking for SS and Gestapo, but who were directly responsible for my suffering. We did find three Germans, and we handed them directly over to the authorities.

And by that time I think most of my hate was gone. School started -- it was starting. By that time I was already well taken care of by a number of refugee organizations who gave me clothes and fed me and helped my financially because I was a political -- ex-political prisoner.

So now they cared for what would happen to me. They asked me what would you like to be now that you're free, and so on. I had never had, all these years I was in prison and I was in camp, I had never had an

opportunity or the desire to think of what my future's going to be. What do I want to be? Do I want to be a mechanic like my father was? Or do I want to be a doctor? And so at one of those interviews in the refugee organization this lady asked me, "What do you want to be?" And I didn't know. I couldn't think of what I wanted to be. And so I was thinking, and all I could think of was seeing those mining engineers in the mine walking around, doing nothing all day long. They come and go underground, go into the mine, walk around for two or three hours, go up to the surface, and "Hey, this is the kind of job I would like to have." So I said, "I want to become a mining engineer." She said, "Okay. Good. That's good."

So they enrolled me into the mining school, technical mining university in Kladno, which is in Bohemia, paid for my study, tried to, you know -- it's ridiculous to even think so, but they did exactly to me what is being done right now here to some of the minorities. My education was -- the last time I went to school was third grade. And I got enrolled in a mining university. They used to call it the Higher Mining School. The prerequisite to get to that school was that you have to have high school degree, that you have to have matura there, and which I didn't have. But because of what happened, because of my past life, I didn't miss any years. And as a matter of fact, I was already in my second year of mining school when I finally did my high school graduation. So in 1948 I became a mining engineer.

Now, can we stop for a minute?

(Break)

So as I said, in 1948 I graduated a mining engineer. I would say by today's standards, I shouldn't have been a mining engineer. It was just I

was particularly pushed and favored because I was spending six, seven years in concentration camp. People, good people, enabled me to become a mining engineer. They helped me, they taught me, gave me lessons, and I did become a mining engineer.

Meanwhile, as a direct consequence of the concentration camp, I was about 19 years old, going to school, and I was taking -- while I was in the camp I had never drunk any alcohol, never even known the effect of alcohol or drugs or anything like that. But after the war, then, after when I was free and a student, I started tasting alcohol, and I loved the effects of it. I started regularly drinking, practically every day. It was practically free; it was good. And just shortly before, a few months before I graduated, I became a drunk in the school. I was drunk and became an alcoholic -- 19 years old. So I was taken to a hospital, and they send me to get delirium treatments. And I was taken to a hospital and taken through a cure. And the cure didn't do very much for me. Except -- well, what was the cure?

The cure was for about ten days in this hospital you get -- every morning they give you a big shot of vitamin B. That's all they did. And the third week, they give you a bucket and they take you into a room, and there is a table with all the liquor and all the booze you like, you prefer, there. And they give you a little pill, and you drink whatever you want to. You do that and drink what you like, and pretty soon you started vomiting, and you vomited. That's what the bucket was for. You vomit all day long. That went on for about another ten days. By the third or fourth day when you get into the room and get that little pill, you don't even want to touch it. They have to force it to you. That's the secret. When you see it, you get nauseated. You just don't drink.

Well, it didn't work very well. When I overcame the nausea after I was let out, I was drinking again. I remember the doctor telling me that there's nothing more to be done for me, not unless I do it myself. He says, "Well, you might as well go shoot yourself or the Germans might have done it for you, because you are not going to live very long like that."

I stopped -- well, actually, I dropped out of school. I went back into the same mine where I was a prisoner of slave labor, went there to work for two weeks. I went back to school, cured, and the good boy, you know, telling them how I would never drink again. I finished and graduated from engineering school. So that was the direct consequence.

While I was in school in Kladno in the previous year -- let's see, that was 1947, and I was on summer vacation. I worked for months in the coal mine as a trainee. They had another month free, and I went into Prague, and there was one continuous party. I was just drinking and boozing, and the other thing I discovered was girls.

There was no girls in the camp or anything. You couldn't even think about it. So again, that was just like booze to me, just like liquor. That was very nice and agreeable and so on. When I went back to school after the vacation, I got a visit from the father of a girl I met in Prague. He told me she's pregnant and I'm the father of her child. And I have got to marry her. If I don't marry her, he's going to have me thrown out of school and all kinds of things. So my mother found out about it, and her being a good Catholic, "Oh, you've done wrong. You've got to marry the girl." I said, "Okay. I'll marry the girl." So we got married, and her name was Eva.

And while I was married, another girl comes and says she's pregnant and she expects a baby, too. So I went and told Eva about it. It

was just -- the whole thing was terrible. I made the biggest mess you can imagine it was -- to let me out of that camp completely unprepared for life. And so I married this one girl; this other girl, I recognized her baby as being the father of it and did my best to continue life.

I got a job at the uranium mines at Joachymsthal after graduation. My daughter was born, and we gave her the name Jana, which is my mother's name. And the other was born, but I didn't know what name she was given or anything like that.

So while I was working at the mine in Joachymsthal that time my daughter was three months old.

My brother Otto, who had the same problem as I had coming out of the camp, he couldn't fit in either. He just had all kinds of -- he wouldn't go to school. He wouldn't go and learn a trade. He just didn't fit in -- couldn't fit in. So he and another guy decided to go and escape and go to the West. And so they escaped from Moravia. I forgot to mention -- in 1947 the Communists took over Czechoslovakia. It was quite customary that quite a few people who didn't agree with what was going on escaped to the West, that means into Western Germany.

So Joachymsthal was a uranium mine, and it belonged to the Russians. It was part of their war bounty. They got the uranium mine, and they needed mining engineers, and they were paying well. And I got a job there with them.

When my brother Otto escaped, they found out about it, and they came one day to the mine and arrested me. The Russians arrested me and accused me of being a spy because my father was in England, my brother now escaped to the West, and I'm working in a secret Russian undertaking.

So I was arrested, again, and I was accused of being a spy. So before they were going to do very much with me, they decided I was in charge of that mine, I was in charge of underground development, that I would hand that over to a Russian engineer. So about three days after they took me back to the mine, under guard, and I went underground with this Russian engineer to explain and show him the joint.

I knew about in this mine -- this was a very old mine, five, six hundred years old -- and there's a lot of underground passages which led out. And I knew about one of these, and that's how I escaped. I escaped and went across the border and, naturally, to escape to the American army.

And they were very glad to see me, because they were very interested in what's happening in this uranium mine. So I remember this captain was telling me that he just wanted me to go back to bring a sample out of the uranium, you know. He said I should get my wife and child out, too, because they are going to go after her now. So I did go back and -- but my wife Eva's grandparents wouldn't even hear about her going with me back. So finally we, you know, fight, arguing, and finally we decided that Eva would come with me, but we would leave my daughter in Czechoslovakia with the grandparents. So I made my way -- or we made our way, back to the border, and I remember walking all night through the forest, you know. The border -- that place was a forest. I must have crossed that border several times during the night, because it wasn't far, you know. But we were lost. And here comes the first daylight and just come -- I see over there (indicating) a uniformed guard. I thought it looked to me just like an American soldier. I thought I was already in the American zone. So I went there, and it was a Czech border policeman. Naturally, he just took his gun and arrested us. He was telling me about --

he said, "Yes, you just had bad luck. The border is right here. See that tree about a hundred meters? That's where the border is."

So he was leading us to the border police station through the forest. I knew I couldn't get caught, because I had this uranium sample with me. I already understood -- I knew I would be in terrible problem. So I sat -- I stopped and sat down. I said, "I don't give a damn. You shoot me, but do whatever you want to. I've been walking all night long, and my wife, she's tired now. And let's take a rest."

"No, no. Come on. It's only about half a kilometer more to the police station. There you can rest all you want."

Oh, we offered this guy our watches, our everything, you know, everything we had, just to let us go. And he wouldn't. So I thought, well, the only thing is I got to jump him. So started marching again, and, like, Eva was ahead of me, and I was behind, and he was behind me with the gun. So I whirled round, and I jumped him and took his gun away, hit him over the head with the Tommy gun.

And I could see where, you know, when I hit him, you could see it split his head open. And so I thought we would run to the border, across the creek. And she run and I run behind her, and halfway through this guy starts yelling, screaming again. So I run back to him, and I hit him over the head again. And I run again away from him. I was -- after I hit him, he was quiet. I ran again behind Eva towards the creek. And he starts screaming again for help. So I fired at him. He was quiet.

We jumped over the creek, and just right there was a German policeman who seen the whole thing. So he took us in and took my gun away, or he took this gun away. All of a sudden this whole border gets alive with dogs and everything. And he says, "Look. Let's get out of here.

Here, take the gun, because they might try to get you. Or we might have to fight it out."

So we got across. We got away. I went back and talked to this American captain and told me -- the next day they arrested me. The Americans did. I says, "What for? Because I did what you wanted me to do?" And he says, "Well, things are a little different now. The Czechs claim that you killed that border policeman and that by doing that you are not considered a refugee. So now we have a treaty with them. We can't -- we'd have to -- if that is true, then we might have to send you back."

I said, "Oh." He said, "But don't worry about that. We send you back; if you have to, kill another Kraut. We'll send you back with a German policeman. We won't send you back with an American soldier. If you have to, kill another German soldier."

He was just fine with that. So that was that. He said, "But don't worry. I'm going to go and try to find out more about it." And he came back. After two days I was released. And he told me the guy's alive. He is not dead. But unfortunate thing is this was that the guy, the border policeman, when they arrested me, he took all my papers, all my IDs, from that Russian mine -- the whole thing.

So they knew who I was, you know. And it was just like leaving your business card with them. And so they went after my mother, and they told her that I killed that man. And this has been going on now for years and years. I was sentenced to death in absentia for it. The end result was that they would not let my mother or any one of my family out of Czechoslovakia, and I couldn't go in because I got sentenced.

The result was that I could not -- I didn't see my mother for 16 years. After 16 years, they finally let her out for a week to meet with me in

Vienna. That was through efforts by the Canadian embassy. So I met her again in 1964 in Vienna for a week, or in 1963, it was. Yeah, '63.

And coming back now to this thing when I was released by the Americans, I was put into a refugee camp in Germany, and then I got in contact with my father in England. He helped me and my wife to get into England. So in England I worked in the coal mines. I was, again, falling back on the same thing. I couldn't work as a mining engineer, because I couldn't speak English. So I worked as a miner in the mines in Manchester.

My marriage to Eva ended in England. We separated; it was really hard. She had to work as a maid, and I was working in the mines in different places. So we separated. I wanted that we should divorce, and she didn't want a divorce. No. She wanted just the separation.

So I left England and went to Canada. Didn't tell her where I'm going or nothing. So then I went to Canada. Eva contacted her parents and finally, I think, in ten years later, we got a divorce out of it.

And I married an Irish woman, Katherine, in Canada, and we were married for about 18 years. I had four children with her. While I was married to Kathy -- we were married in -- how should I say? Now, getting back to what I was --.

So in Canada, I was long enough in Canada -- I was working in the mines in underground construction. I got Canadian citizenship, and I went to Venezuela to build tunnels and so on.

We were in Venezuela for six years. Matter of fact, three of my children were born in Venezuela. Then we come back. We went back to Canada, and I started specializing in underground construction for subways and so on. I built part of Montreal subway and Toronto subway,

and based on my experience, I was asked to come here to San Francisco and was in charge of building the subway section in Oakland, in the Oakland "Y" which going under the Bay. I didn't do the section under the Bay, but I worked on it.

So did I leave anything out? Well, we came back to Canada in '63. And I worked in India and then I worked in Ceylon on various dam and tunnel projects. And then I came back here to Oakland, to do that job in Oakland.

So, yeah, while still in Venezuela -- and it must have been about -- the other girl which became pregnant contacted my mother and told her she had had a daughter. My mother writes me and tells me, "You have a daughter, 12-year-old daughter, in Czechoslovakia." So I had two daughters there now. My mother was pleased because at least she had one grandchild she can have around. So I supported the daughters as much as I can through --

(Change of tape. Begin Tape 2 of 2)

Q: OKAY.

A: Well, this daughter was Jana, and the other one is Marta. The direct consequences, I would say, of the concentration camp or of the Holocaust.

So here I got a daughter in Czechoslovakia which I don't see. The other one I didn't see; I never knew her. I can't go back to see or visit or can't take care of my obligations towards the child. I tried to support her as best I could through sending money to my mother, and my mother was making sure she got it.

This girl's name is Marta. Her mother was Jewish, and her mother decided to go back -- as a matter of fact, she went in 1949 to Israel. Then

she came back from Israel to Czechoslovakia, didn't like it, and went back to Israel again when the daughter was about 13 years old.

As a direct consequence, I have a daughter in Israel who is 43 years old called Marta. And I have a daughter -- this Marta. I've -- well, let's say I've been in contact with her, writing with her for many, many years, from all over the world, wherever I was. Marta got married about 10, 12 years ago to an Argentina fellow in Israel, has a son, and is now divorced. The man went back to Argentina. The son is 18, 19 years old, and he has problems -- very similar to the problems my brother Otto has. He can't fit in, doesn't want to work, is hard to handle.

In 1977 I went to Israel to meet her mother and her daughter, Marta. That's the one and only time I met her. We're in contact; she is writing to me, and I am writing to her. There's no future in that.

With respect to my other daughter, Jana, which is in Prague, that's turned out a little bit better. Her mother stayed in England for about 20 years, married somebody, and then went back to Czechoslovakia to her home with Jana.

Jana is a lawyer and works for the Ministry of Finance in Prague and has two children. She's happily married. One is Janka; also Jana. She is my granddaughter; she is now 20. She just got married, and she has a son, 18. So these are my major grandchildren.

When the border opened in Czechoslovakia two years ago, I was assured that everything that happened to me during that time was under amnesty. They said I can return to Czechoslovakia. Two years ago I took my son Michael with me and we went to Czechoslovakia. The first time I seen my daughter Jana after 42 years.

I've seen my sister and my brother several times when I went to Europe, and they got permission to get out to Vienna. So that was no big problem. But I could never really be in contact with Jana for political reasons because of what I did and she was in a very sensitive position. Her husband is Chief of Detectives in Prague. It was a very bad situation. But that's all over now. I was in Prague again, visiting, three months ago with my wife Nancy. And we had the last year -- last year we had Janka over for four months. She learned English in that time. She is doing well.

So I would say my drinking at that time in school was a direct consequence of that. As a good Austrian I was used to drinking wine and beer by the time I'm ten years old, but I never had it before. When I was 17 years old, and the first time I took a sip, it was great. And so, anyway, I didn't have that problem -- alcohol problem. Also, I -- in the past I used to drink quite heavily, but never to the extent where I was becoming sick like I was in Prague.

Can we hold for a minute?

(Break)

Coming back now to another direct consequence of the Holocaust is my father. My father was born in this little Moravian town, Pohrlitz. His father was there. His grandfather was there. And he comes from a nice, middle-class Jewish family. I don't think he was very Orthodox, but what I do know, he was from Day One, he was a very strong anti-Nazi. The people in Pohrlitz, the Germans, knew about it, and so when Hitler moved into Pohrlitz, the first thing they came was looking for my mother.

I remember that as clearly as today. First thing in the morning. At night I knew he was gone, and in the morning they were already looking for him. The same thing was in Berno when Hitler took over

Czechoslovakia. I seen my father in the evening, and in the morning the German soldiers were there. And he was gone.

The Gestapo was looking for him. He was on a list -- what they called -- he was on a list. They were looking for him. So my father made his way to Poland and from Poland across to England, and in England he joined the Czech brigade as an officer and fought on the side of the English against the Germans.

Mind you, I didn't know that. This is only -- I found it out after the war. So we were sitting at home -- we were waiting for my father to come and take us out of that misery we were in, because the condition was still the same. Nobody was giving us anything. I was going to school. My sister was going to school, my mother doing laundry, having this sick boy on her hands, and just waiting. We always said during the war when we were in camp and things are getting dark, "Just wait until Father comes back. Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine. Just be patient."

Here it was 1944 and my father didn't come. So we started looking. We started inquiring about him, and we found he was alive in England, and through the Red Cross he got word from us, and he did come in early '46. He did come back.

I was already at school, at Kladna, when he came back. We thought everything was going to be fine, but today I can understand him much better. When he come back, he sees my mother a wreck, my sister a wreck, this cripple of a child, and the conditions they were living in -- we were in. And he told my mother that he will have to go back to England to finish some other business there and that he will be back within a month.

Well, my father never did come back. The next contact I had with him was when I wrote him that I'm in Germany in this refugee camp, and

I needed help. And he did help me get out. My relationship with my father never was very good after that because I was very disappointed, and especially when I found out that he married again without benefit of divorcing my mother.

And we had a discussion about that, and he claims that at one point during the war he wrote to the Swiss Red Cross to find out what happened to his family. And he got a letter back telling him that they're sorry, but all of the Kobler family died in Auschwitz.

And so that was it. All the Kobler family died in Auschwitz. That's true. His brother, his sister, the child of his brother died. They went through this camp at Auschwitz. I've heard a story that my uncle Bertel, that's his brother, was digging graves in Joachymsthal and then when he was -- when they were transported over the Auschwitz, he was on one of the gas commandos in the ovens and that he was -- he committed his wife and his child -- that was part of his job. And then shortly after that he was also gassed.

Now I heard that story from two people right after the war. I don't know whether it's true or not. I don't know. But the fact is that all of the Kobler family died in Auschwitz, but not this Kobler.

And so, yes, that was maybe justification for my father not to show up right after the war, but there was no justification not to stand up and say, "Well, look, situation is like that." But to say instead, "Well, I'm going to be back in a month," and he never did come back. So that's my father.

Okay, now, where can I start now? Let's see. Where were we? Canada. As I said, from Canada we went to Venezuela, spent six years in Venezuela, and then I worked again in Canada. And that's how I came to

San Francisco some 20 years ago, 1967, yes, '67. We were working on the BART. After the BART, I went to Chile. I was building a big mine in Chile, the Andina mine, and we were two years in Chile. It was very nice. It was very nice for the children to grow up.

Then after that, we went back to -- yeah, we went back to New Jersey. And I was working in New York on a tunnel project, and we were living in New Jersey.

From New Jersey I went to Costa Rica. I worked a couple of years in Costa Rica and then came back to San Francisco. And I think we settled in San Francisco in '74. I came back to San Francisco, and I was a partner in an engineering company in San Francisco for ten years.

From San Francisco I went -- in 1980, we moved out of San Francisco and moved into Healdsburg into the area where we are now.

And my profession being what it is, I have to go on to projects. So I made my base in Healdsburg, but while there we were working in the Dominican Republic. I had my own company then. I had Michael and Otto and Joseph, my son, all three of them were working on a tunnel contract in the Dominican Republic.

Then I took a project in Venezuela again, which was an extremely difficult tunnel project, about 24 miles of tunnel, world renowned of its difficulty. I joint ventured between a Spanish contractor and a Venezuelan contractor. Tried for two years, I couldn't do anything with it to get this project going because of the geological difficulties. Then since I am an expert in this field, I was called in as a consultant to this project.

And at that time the Germans had a contract. It was about a $100 million contract. The company is Hoch-Tief, which is one of the biggest German construction companies. I was called in to give judgment on

their performance, which was piss poor. The Germans got ahold of an engineer who was a friend of mine, and they sent a Mercedes to the airport to pick me up. And they tried very hard to influence me that I would give a favorable report on their performance. All the supervisors were German and, since I spoke German, they thought me a German, too. And they told me all kinds of thing. And I'd wrote a report and told the Venezuelan government that they should kick the Germans off it, that they don't know what they're doing. So the Germans were fighting the Venezuelans not to be kicked off the contract. Because they say, if we can't do it, nobody can do it. Nobody in this world can do this tunnel.

So they got kicked off, and they said now is the chance for you to prove it. So I formed a joint venture with a Venezuelan contractor who is a very good friend of mine, who I worked with before; and we bid on the tunnel, and we done this portion of the tunnel, took us about three years.

I took Michael and Otto and Joseph there. And I brought in a bunch -- a couple of more engineers from Montana School of Mines, and we did the tunnel and -- we did it.

There was a big conference on tunneling; and there was this international tunnel expert, including the Germans, come to see what we did, and how we did it. And then in evening there was a reception. And at the reception I had a few drinks and so on, here we talk and comes in this German vice-president from Hoch-Tief and tells me now, "Mr. Kobler, please tell us, where did we go wrong? What did we do wrong that we couldn't do it? We have so much years and years of experience, and here you came with a bunch of kids. And you did it. What was the secret? What was -- what is it?"

People came around and stood around, listening up. And I said to him, "Listen, you did nothing wrong. You only made one mistake."

"Oh, what was that?"

"You didn't kill me when you had me. That's the only thing you did wrong. You should have killed me. Otherwise the stupid Venezuelans would have believed you, and you would have been the heroes. There's your mistake."

And that's how I got even with them, by telling him that. And so after that, that was my -- I would say, was my biggest satisfaction, to be able to tell him he should have killed me.

So after that we went -- where did we go then? We went to -- as a matter of fact, after that I retired. I broke my back. I'll tell you that later. While we were still working in Venezuela, the job was progressing. I was coming more often home on vacation, and my son Michael was in charge of the project.

And we were -- I came home in Healdsburg and through the years I loved flying. I got my pilot's license. I had my own plane for many years. I flew once from Costa Rica when we finished the job -- flew my little plane, a two-seater, with Michael as copilot. He was 15 years old -- flew in from Costa Rica to New Jersey area and from New Jersey to San Francisco. So I'm a devoted pilot, and so is he -- he got his pilot's license in '64, or -- I mean '84, or was it '83? On my visit, here on my vacation, I seen this ultralight planes flying at the same airport where I kept my plane. And I said, Gee, this would be a great thing to take with me to South America, to Venezuela so these young engineers, they got something to do -- they can fly these ultralight planes on the job site.

So I was going to buy one. And you can pack up the whole airplane and put it on your car roof and go. That to me was the most ideal thing to take with me. I was going to buy the plane. I made a deal, but first of all, "Before I buy it, you teach me how to fly that plane." So the first lesson -- well, the plane got up and I crashed and I broke my back. I had -- and this was not the first time I broke my back. I had my back broken in Chile and in England in the coal mines and once in Costa Rica, but this time I really got it good.

So then going down, going down a gold mine in Chile, I slipped, and I fell down the shaft. And I caught myself still and wrecked my two shoulders. So comes '85 I thought, "It's about time I should retire." You know, I was getting in bad shape. My heart wasn't so good any more. So I made a deal with my partner. I said, "I'm going to go and retire in '86, in March." And I retired from the company.

But in July I got a call there. They wanted me. They have a tunnel in Washington, which is under the Anacosta River and which is run into trouble. And they can't find anybody else there. And I went out of retirement. Once again took my son Michael with me and some other people who worked with me for years and again the impossible was done. We got -- I drove the one tunnel. It was twin tunnels. And Michael stayed on to do the second one.

Coming back to Michael -- maybe this is also -- he is also a direct consequence of the camp. He's a hell of a nice guy. He graduated a mining engineer from Montana Technical School. It took him -- I say it took him ten years, but it's not true. It took him about eight years, but I tell him it's ten years just to needle him. But what he was doing was, he used to work for me and then he goes up there and studies for another

year, then he's broke. Then he comes back. But the amazing thing was every year he went up there, he came back with one more kid. So when he graduated, he had three kids. He finally graduated in engineering. It was '85, yeah, '85. So he has four kids.

Now, I was very strict with my children. I always -- I never had a father to tell me you got to do this or you got to do that or you got to behave. All I seen for my behavior was what I seen in the concentration camp. That's my formative years -- were in the camp. So I beat my kids. I told them, "Hey, if I can't slap you around any more, you're getting too big, I'll punch you. If I can't punch you, I'll take a gun and shoot you. But you do whatever I want you to do." So I kind of was a very strict father to them. I loved them very much, but I didn't let them get away with very much.

So Mike decides he is not going to go and punish his children. He's not going to go to slap them. And this one kid, Brian, is 14 years old, and he's never been slapped by his father, you know. I think that is very dangerous, because I see a 14-year-old boy, he comes home -- he plays baseball; baseball is his life -- he doesn't do any work. He plays baseball or sits, watch television. I tell him, "Come and work with me on the ranch." He doesn't want to do that. He doesn't like to work. I'm afraid to see all his children are like that. And I'm afraid that if they don't know anything but what they watch on television, because that is their whole life, again some demagogue, some asshole like Hitler may come along and twist their minds and make little sheep out of them, following. And if they can't use their own head -- and there is one problem. When I talk to him and say I like you to believe me when I tell you these things are like that, they can happen so easy, people can twist it. I see it right now in politics

twist the good around to bad and bad around to good, and children and grownups who have no background to fall down on believe this.

Q: CAN I ASK YOU TO SPELL WORDS?

A: Okay. Let me get my glasses.

Q: OKAY. NOW WHAT I'M GOING TO DO IS PRONOUNCE WORDS THE WAY I HEARD THEM AND ASK YOU TO SPELL THEM. IS THIS POHRLITZ?

A: Pohrlitz, okay. Now give me a piece of paper, and I'll write it down for me so I can spell it for you. How is that?

Q: OKAY.

A: Just a moment.

Q: BECAUSE I WANT TO PRONOUNCE THEM.

A: Okay. Pohrlitz, P-o-h-r-l-i-t-z.

Q: OKAY. THERE WAS A WORD, OBERNA?

A: Berno is -- let me write here what is the name of these towns are now in Czechoslovakia, because they were Czech.

Q: ALSO SAY THEM AND SPELL THEM.

A: Okay. That's in Czech. That is in German. Okay. NOW< Pohrlitz is in German. In Czech, it is Pohorelice. In Czech, P-o-h-o-r-e-l-i-c-e, and "R" has a little stuff on top of it.

do you want this a cap? nope

Q: OKAY. AND THERE WAS BERNO?

A: Berno. In Czech, Berno. In German, Brün.

Q: SPELL IT BOTH WAYS.

lowercase

A: In German, B-r-ü-n. The "Ú" has an umlaut on it, which is two little dots on top. And Berno is B-e-r-n-o.

Q: THEN ZNEIM. THERE WAS A TOWN CALLED ZNEIM?

A: Zneim, Zneim. Okay, this is Zneim: Z-n-e-i-m.

A: Zneim, Zneim. Okay, this is Zneim: Z-n-e-i-m.

Q: AND THAT WAS GERMAN?

A: That's German.

Q: IN CZECH?

A: In Czech is Znojmo, Z-n-o-j-m-o.

Q: OKAY. WAS IT JAN, OR HANSI?

A: That's Ivancice. In German, Eibenschütz, spelled --

Q: AND COULD YOU SPELL THAT FOR THE TRANSCRIBER?

A: Okay. German, Eibenschütz, this is where the camp was, is E-i-b-e-n-s-c-h-ü-t-z. And the "u" has an umlaut.

Q: AND IN CZECH?

A: In Czech, Ivancice, I-v-a-n-c-i-c-e. And the first "c" has a hook on top of it.

Q: OKAY. NOW HOW DID YOU PRONOUNCE YOUR YOUNGEST BROTHER'S NAME? JAN?

A: Jan.

Q: DID YOU HAVE ANOTHER WORD YOU USED?

A: Hansi.

Q: OKAY. THAT'S WHAT THESE TWO WORDS ARE. HOW DO YOU SPELL BOTH OF THEM?

A: Hansi and Jan. Actually his name is Johan.

Q: AND THAT'S J-O-H-A-N?

A: Yeah.

Q: AND JAN IS J-A-N?

A: Yes. Hansi -- is German for Hans, but small.

Q; AND IT'S H-A-N-S-I?

A: Yeah.

Q: MISCHLINGS?

A: Okay.

Q: IT DOESN'T NEED TO --

A: It's spelled m-i-s-c-h-l-i-n-g.

Q: OKAY. GREAT.

A: What's the English word for that?

Q: HALF-BREED. THAT'S CLOSE.

A: Yeah.

Q: OSLAVANY?

A: Oslavany, okay. I'm trying to think what Oslavany is in German.

Q: WELL, JUST SPELL IT.

A: Okay. Oslavany, O-s-l-a-v-a-n-y.

Q: OKAY. POSTELBERG?

A: Okay, in German, P-o-s-t-e-l-b-e-r-g. In Czech, it is Posteloprty, P-o-s-t-e-l-o-p-r-t-y, Posteloprty.

Q: OKAY. SAAZ?

A: Saaz; I think Saaz is S-a-a-z. Now, don't -- I'm not a hundred percent sure that that's right, but I'm sure in Czech what it is. Zatc. That is Saaz, S-a-a-z, in German, and in Czech is Zatc, Z-a-t-c.

Q: OKAY. OKAY. IS MORAVIA ON HERE?

A: Let's see. Moravia is M-o-r-a-v-i-a.

Q: M-O-R-A-V-I-A?

A: Okay. In Czech, it's Morava. This is a province.

Q: M-O-R-A-V-A?

A: M-o-r-a-v-a.

Q: OKAY. AND IN GERMAN IS THE "I"?

A: No, this is English. And in German, it's Mahren, M-a-h-r-e-n.

Q: OKAY. OH, OKAY. THAT'S KAUNICOVECOLEJE, OR SOMETHING?

A: That's a Gestapo prison in Berno, K-a-u-n-i-c-o-v-e-c-o-l-e-j-e.

Q: OKAY. MIROSOV?

A: Mirosov, M-i-r-o-s-o-v, with the "s" has a hook on it. Mirosov.

Q: AND THAT'S IN GERMAN?

A: No, no. I don't know in German.

Q: OKAY. IT'S CZECH?

A: Yeah, Czech.

Q: OKAY. WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE FIRST CONCENTRATION CAMP?

A: That one was in Ivancice.

Q: SO DO WE HAVE THAT DOWN THERE?

A: Yes. Okay.

Q: OKAY. NOW I HAVE GOT A FEW WORDS HERE.

A: It's called Jewish concentration camp in Ivancice.

Q: NOW IS TODD, T-O-D-D?

A: What?

Q: I JUST SPELLED TODD. KARLSBAD? K-A-R-L-S-B-A-D. DACHAU, D-A-C-H-A-U. NOW THE PRISON IN BERNO IS THE ONE YOU ALREADY SPELLED. THE GUN THAT YOU CALLED A WALTHER GUN, W-A-L-T-H-E-R?

A: Yes, it was a Walther. It's not a PPK.

Q: I'VE SEEN IT WRITTEN W-A-L-T-H-E-R.

A: Yeah, t-h-e-r. Just a Walther gun.

Q: THEN A RAILROAD TOWN SOUNDED LIKE JIJHLAVA?

A: Yeah, that I know -- Iglau, in German. Okay, in German, Iglau,

I-g-l-a-u, and in Czech, it's Jijhlava, J-i-j-h-l-a-v-a.

Q: OKAY. I'LL JUST SPELL A COUPLE WORDS ACCORDING TO MY LIST. RAUS, R-A-U-S. WEHRMACHT IS WHAT THE GERMAN SOLDIERS WERE, W-E-H-R-M-A-C-H-T. NOW YOU TALKED ABOUT YOU WENT HOME TO IVANCICE? IS THAT DOWN HERE ALREADY?

A: Yes, here.

Q: NOW KLADNO?

A: Kladno, that's the town we went to school in. K-l-a-d-n-o.

Q: NOW, KLADNO WAS K-L-A-D-N-O?

A: K-l-a-d-n-o, yes.

Q: BUT IN THERE YOU TALKED ABOUT MATURA, BUT YOU MAY HAVE MEANT MATRICULATION?

A: Matura, yeah. But matura in German is high school matriculation, m-a-t-u-r-a.

Q: M-A-T-U-R-A?

A: Yes.

Q YOU TALKED ABOUT JOACHYMSTHAL; IS THAT DOWN HERE ALREADY?

A: Yeah. Let me write that down on here. Joachymsthal, J-o-a-c-h-y-m-s-t-h-a-l.

Q: OKAY.

A: In Czech it's called Jachimov, J-a-c-h-i-m-o-v.

Q: OKAY. I'M GOING TO SPELL HEALDSBURG, H-E-A-L-D-S-B-U-R-G?

A: Right.

Q: NOW, THE ONE DAUGHTER'S NAME IS JANA?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: THAT'S -- HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT?

A: Jana, just like that, Jana, J-a-n-a.

Q: OH, OKAY. AND THEN ONE MORE WORD, HOCH-TIEF?

A: That's a company called Hoch-Tief, H-o-c-h (dash) T-i-e-f.

Q: OKAY. THAT'S IT. THANKS.

A: I leave that with you. I think the pen belongs to --

Q: IT'S MINE.

A: It's yours? Okay.

Q: THANKS AGAIN. WE REALLY APPRECIATE THIS.

A: Now write me down your name and his name.

(End of tape.)